

Castrate the Father: Lewis's *The Monk* and the Devil's Pact

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Matthew Gregory Lewis's (1775-1818) *The Monk* was a very successful novel when it was published in 1796. By the early 19th century, it had become one of the most widely read pieces of Gothic fiction, and had a major influence on authors like E.T.A. Hoffmann¹. Similar to other Gothic novelists, Lewis uses motifs from witchcraft lore and ritual magic grimoires to enhance the story's vividness and sensationalism. The novel's popularity was mostly due to its controversial exhibitions of transgressive sexuality, and the use of rituals therein shows how Lewis's eclectic and shallow portrayal of the esoteric was entangled with sexual taboo. Thus, his employment of esoteric tropes is often so unserious, so seemingly hapahazard, and so broad that historians of esotericism may not find much of interest here aside from literary or pop-culture history. However, from the perspective of criticism there's perhaps more to work with: a psychoanalytical reading of the demonological aspects of *The Monk*, read against Lewis's own biography, produces clear resonances with enticing details.

The plot of the novel

Let's start with a description of the plot, including the novel's most detailed magical scenes, the invocations of Lucifer. The protagonist is named Ambrosio. He began life as an orphan, left on the steps of an abbey in Madrid. But he grows up to be an abbot renowned for his skillful sermons. Despite his pious reputation, he is haunted by sexual passion. These passions take a devastating turn when he is seduced by a sorceress named Matilda, who had initially disguised herself as a young monk. After losing his virginity, Ambrosio's interest in Matilda fades, and he falls in love with another woman, the young Antonia. In order to possess Antonia, Ambrosio participates in a demonic invocation with the help of Matilda. She leads Ambrosio beneath a Sepulchre of St. Clare, entering a vast underground labyrinth. Once in the necessary chamber, she changes outfits into a long, sleeveless black robe, with gold embroidery of "a variety of unknown characters"; the robe is fastened by a girdle of precious stones, with a dagger at her hip and a golden wand in her hand. Then:

She motioned that Ambrosio should be silent, and began the mysterious rites. She drew a circle round him, another round herself, and then taking a small Phial from the Basket, poured a few drops upon the ground before her. She bent over the place, muttered some indistinct sentences, and immediately a pale sulphurous flame arose from the ground. It increased by degrees, and at length spread its waves over the whole surface, the circles alone excepted in which stood Matilda and the Monk. [...] Matilda continued her incantations: At intervals She took various articles from the

¹ See James M. McGlathery, "Demon Love: E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Elixire des Teufels*", *Colloquia Germanica*, 12-1/2 (1979), p. 61-76.

Basket, the nature and name of most of which were unknown to the Friar: But among the few which He distinguished, He particularly observed three human fingers, and an Agnus Dei which She broke in pieces. She threw them all into the flames which burned before her, and they were instantly consumed. [...] She uttered a loud and piercing shriek. She appeared to be seized with an access of delirium; She tore her hair, beat her bosom, used the most frantic gestures, and drawing the poignard from her girdle plunged it into her left arm. The blood gushed out plentifully, and as She stood on the brink of the circle, She took care that it should fall on the outside. The flames retired from the spot on which the blood was pouring. A volume of dark clouds rose slowly from the ensanguined earth [...]².

From those dark clouds, a naked teenage boy emerges:

He was perfectly naked: A bright Star sparkled upon his fore-head; Two crimson wings extended themselves from his shoulders and his silken locks were confined by a band of many-coloured fires, which played round his head, formed themselves into a variety of figures, and shone with a brilliance far surpassing that of precious Stones. Circlets of Diamonds were fastened round his arms and ankles, and in his right hand He bore a silver branch, imitating Myrtle; His form shone with dazzling glory: He was surrounded by clouds of rose-coloured light [...]³.

Matilda fiercely intimidates the naked youth into giving up his magical branch. After the ritual concludes, she reveals that the demonic youth is Lucifer. The silver branch is a talisman which can both open doors and induce sleep. Matilda instructs the monk:

Then breathe upon it [the branch] thrice, pronounce her name, and place it upon her pillow. A death-like slumber will immediately seize upon her, and deprive her of the power of resisting your attempts. Sleep will hold her till break of Morning. In this state you may satisfy your desires without danger of being discovered; since when day-light shall dispel the effects of the enchantment, Antonia will perceive her dishonour, but be ignorant of the Ravisher⁴.

In the following chapter, Ambrosio uses the talisman as described, but he is discovered by Antonia's mother, Elvira, before he can commit the crime. He kills Elvira by suffocation and escapes the room without defiling his beloved. The monk destroys the branch talisman out of anguish, and so he decides to drug Antonia and fake her death, again with Matilda's help. Antonia is buried in a vault in the Sepulchre of St. Clare, the same site of Lucifer's first invocation. When Ambrosio breaks into the vault at night, the girl awakens in confusion, and he declares his passions. She resists him, but he is enraged with lust: "her alarm, her evident disgust, and incessant opposition, seemed only to inflame the Monk's desires, and supply his brutality with additional strength". He rapes her and immediately falls out of love with her, descending into shame. When Antonia tries to escape, he kills her with a dagger to keep her silent. But the monk and Matilda are discovered regardless. They are both arrested and brought before the Inquisition to be charged with numerous crimes, including sorcery.

After days of torture, Matilda appears in the monk's cell, dressed in fine robes. She says that she has escaped punishment by offering her soul to Lucifer, and attempts to persuade Ambrosio to do the same. He refuses, but she leaves a book in his room, and if he reads the first four lines of the seventh page backwards, Lucifer will appear. After being sentenced to death, Ambrosio has a change of heart and uses the book. This time, Lucifer comes in a very different form:

He appeared in all that ugliness, which since his fall from heaven had been his portion: His blasted limbs still bore marks of the Almighty's thunder: A swarthy darkness spread itself over his gigantic form: His hands and feet were armed with long Talons: Fury glared in his eyes, which might have

² Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, edited by Howard Anderson, revised and with an Introduction and Notes by Nick Groom, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 212.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

struck the bravest heart with terror: Over his huge shoulders waved two enormous sable wings; and his hair was supplied by living snakes, which twined themselves round his brows with frightful hissings. In one hand He held a roll of parchment, and in the other an iron pen. Still the lightning flashed around him, and the Thunder with repeated bursts, seemed to announce the dissolution of Nature⁵.

After much argument, Ambrosio eventually signs the bloody devil's pact, binding his soul to Hell in exchange for escape from prison. Naturally, Lucifer betrays him through a clever interpretation of the wording, claiming that his only obligation was to free the monk from the cell. The fallen angel also reveals that Matilda was a demonic minion of his sent to tempt the monk, and that Elvira was the monk's mother and thus Antonia his sister, meaning Ambrosio accidentally committed incest and murdered his own long-lost family. The book ends when Lucifer kills the monk by dropping him from the sky.

The sources of the book

The above examples make it clear that Lewis crafts the esoteric scenes in a bricolage method to achieve a sort of stereotypical pastiche. Said another way, the ritual elements are vague and eclectic assortments of motifs, suggesting that Lewis had read widely on esoteric matters but perhaps not very deeply. More specifically, the choice of a gravesite as the place for Lucifer's first invocation could broadly reference necromancy⁶; the unknown alphabetic characters that Lewis never actually describes could index Solomonic magic⁷, John Dee's Enochian⁸, and/or any number of other European thinkers who theorized magical characters, like Ficino, Pico, Reuchlin, Paracelsus, Fludd, Agrippa, Trithemius, de Pasqually, etc.⁹; the silver branch talisman is possibly a reference to Irish folklore¹⁰, such as the *Voyage of Bran*, and/or to the Roman tradition of the "golden bough" as seen in the *Aeneid*¹¹; and, the making of an infernal contract is a famous ritual motif within many intersecting Christian traditions, one of the earliest tales being the medieval legend of Saint Theophilus¹², but is more commonly seen in early-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁶ See Erika Bourguignon, "Necromancy", in Lindsay Jones (dir.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 10, Detroit, Macmillan Reference, 2005 (2nd ed.), p. 6452-6453. See also Paul Devereux, "Talking and Walking with Spirits: Fresh Perspectives on a Medieval Necromantic System", in Patrick Curry (ed.), *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, p. 243-249.

⁷ "Prayers, the engraving of characters and the pronouncement of unknown words, typical of Hermetic and Solomonic necromantic magic, identify a supernatural agent as object of veneration and are therefore demonic practices. By contrast, the engraving of intelligible words – such as *amor*, *destruction* – and the pronouncement of the name of the thing and of the planet, [...] refer to a natural agent, that is to say, the stellar influx"; Paolo Lucentini & Vittoria Perrone Compagni, "Hermetic Literature II: Latin Middle Ages", in Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2006, p. 499-529, here p. 524.

⁸ See György E. Szonyi, "Dee, John" in Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, *op. cit.*, p. 301-309, here p. 306-307.

⁹ Theories of magical characters are far too numerous to divulge here but, for a few examples, see Gilles Le Pape, "Cryptography", in Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, *op. cit.*, p. 287-291; Idem, "Les écritures à lunettes comme moyen de communication avec le monde des intermédiaires", *Politica Hermetica*, 13 (1999), p. 68-87.

¹⁰ See Eleanor Hull, "The Silver Bough in Irish Legend", *Folklore*, 12-4 (1901), p. 431-445.

¹¹ See "Appendix 2: The Golden Bough: Orphic, Eleusinian and Hellenistic-Jewish Sources of Virgil's Underworld in *Aeneid* VI", in Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2014, p. 180-204.

¹² Kimberly Ball, "The Devil's Pact: Diabolic Writing and Oral Tradition", *Western Folklore*, 73-4 (2014), p. 385-409, here p. 386.

modern witch-hunt manuals like Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484)¹³, Jean Bodin's *On the Demon-Mania of Witches* (1580)¹⁴, and Pierre de Lancre's *On the Inconstancy of Witches* (1612)¹⁵.

This combination of imagery from Solomonic traditions, Irish mythology, and witch-hunt polemics never really amounts to any kind of intellectual moment in Lewis's book. Thus, Lewis's esoteric symbolism seems only for enhancing the sensationalism of certain scenes through a very generalized esoteric veneer. In the British context, this novel appears after the "Witchcraft Act" of 1735 that had reduced witchcraft charges to fraud, and thus the book is essentially a product of the post-witch-hunt era, which would explain the playfulness and irreverence that Lewis affords to his haphazard occult mash-ups. *The Monk* is of course part of a larger literary current. Several accounts of inspiration are clear, notably Goethe's *Faust* (1790), Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), and the Islamic legend of Barsisa (1713)¹⁶, each tale involving entanglements of sexual desire and demonic pacts. *Faust* is a particularly noteworthy influence. Lewis was living in Germany in the early 1790s when he got the idea for *The Monk*. He was even personally acquainted with Goethe and later translated some of Goethe's work¹⁷. Immediately after the novel's release, Lewis was accused of "plagiarizing" Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux* (1772)¹⁸. It's worth pointing out that both Cazotte's novel and *The Monk* take place in Spain, which is a possible reference to Luis Vélez de Guevara's *El Diablo Cojuelo* (1641). Vélez's satirical novella takes place in Madrid, like *The Monk*, and Lewis was very familiar with Spanish literature¹⁹.

Devil pacts and transgressive sex were connected in the European imagination before the Renaissance, but they seem to have become more and more inextricable over time, and eventually became a standard feature of witch-hunt manuals. One component of the devil's pact in de Lancre's *Inconstancy* is the "anal kiss", where witches pledge allegiance to Satan by kissing his anus²⁰. Satan was also reputed to take the form of a goat in order to have intercourse with married women. Oftentimes, powerful people were accused of both satanic pacts and inappropriate forms of sex, presumably for political reasons. In the French context, Lewis was perhaps aware of Baron Gilles de Rais, mentioned in Bodin's *Demon-Mania*²¹. De Rais was a fifteenth-century warlord and companion to Joan of Arc; he was accused of raping and murdering many children in an attempt to summon demons, and executed by the state in 1440. There was also Father Louis Gaufridy, accused of causing an outbreak of demonic possessions in an Ursuline convent, and executed in 1611. De Lancre claims that Gaufridy's pact with Satan allowed the priest to attain

¹³ Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated with an introduction, bibliography and notes by the Rev. Montague Summers, London, Pushkin Press, 1948, p. 99-104.

¹⁴ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, translated by Randy A. Scott, abridged with an introduction by Jonathan L. Pearl, Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995, p. 90, p. 112, n. 62, and p. 140.

¹⁵ Pierre de Lancre, *On the Inconstancy of Witches*, general editor Gerhild Scholz Williams, translators Harriet Stone and Gerhild Scholz Williams, Tempe/Turnhout, Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies/Brepols, 2006, p. 185-196.

¹⁶ The "Santon Barsisa" legend is an openly admitted influence in the "Advertisement" to the novel; Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Daniel L. MacDonald, *Monk Lewis: A Critical Biography*, Toronto/Buffalo/London, University of Toronto Press, 2000, p. 103.

¹⁸ Anonymous, "Art. 20: *The Monk*: A Romance...", *The Monthly Review*, 23 (May-August 1797), p. 451.

¹⁹ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, *op. cit.*, p. 6, and p. 133-134.

²⁰ Pierre de Lancre, *On the Inconstancy of Witches*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²¹ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

sexual power over women by blowing air into their nostrils²². The Gaufridy case prefaced the later and more well-known execution of Father Urbain Grandier in 1634, accused of worshipping Satan, making demonic pacts for magical powers, and having sex with nuns²³, which inspired Ken Russell's film *The Devils* (1971).

As already said, the apparent irreverence that *The Monk* portrays likely stems from Lewis's fixation on shock-value, affording a very practical application of magical and demonic imagery whereby the esoteric seems only intended to heighten the transgressiveness of sexual misconduct. Note that Lucifer's silver branch causes the sleeper to forget the identity of their rapist, but not the fact that they were raped. Therefore, the talisman not only would have given Ambrosio the power to rape without consequence, it would have also imposed the knowledge of that violation upon the victim and hence intensified the sadism of the act. This is not an incidental dynamic, nor is this dynamic unrelated to the novel's success. Transgressive pleasures are also part of why esotericism works as an aesthetic device in many contexts, not just in literature and art. Hugh Urban writes in his 2003 article, "The Power of the Impure":

In ecstatic mystical experience or religious rites, such as blood sacrifice, carnivals, etc., one must first create an aura of purity before one can defile it with violence, transgression and the overturning of law. [...] the transgressive ritual acts like a form of *socio-nuclear fission*; that is to say, it first *exaggerates* and then *shatters* the laws that make up the social organism at its most fundamental atomic level, thereby releasing an explosive burst of energy²⁴.

Here we see the appeal of Ambrosio's crimes. His status as a famous monk cultivates the aura of purity and exaggerates the taboo, as the other characters do not suspect him prone to sexual deviance and/or demonic allegiance. In other words, Ambrosio's social position of perceived sanctity potentiates his liberating corruption. And the sick wickedness of the black magic facilitating his criminality makes him all the more corrupted, thus his downfall is all the more intensified.

Yet, if we only approach this particular occultural context from a strictly "transgression" perspective (which is a fair approach to take), or even just a strictly historicist point of view by tracing out all these motifs to achieve a sense of how esoteric ideas/images operate through influence, we might miss something. *The Monk* does not explicitly give us a sophisticated or knowledgeable take on any given current of esotericism, so literary occultural analyses of this novel are rather limited if we're stuck in history proper, so to speak. Additionally, because *The Monk* is not really a canonical high-art piece²⁵, historicist interpretations of its superficial esoteric dimensions run the risk of being disciplinarily insular, and it's arguable that literary occultural studies could benefit from more interdisciplinarity. Said another way, it may assist a literary historian's mission if literary critics were also interested in the specific history at hand, because

²² Pierre de Lancre, *On the Inconstancy of Witches*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

²³ See Robert Rapley, *A Case of Witchcraft: The Trial of Urbain Grandier*, Montreal & Kingston / London / Ithaca, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.

²⁴ Hugh B. Urban, "The Power of the Impure: Transgression, Violence and Secrecy in Bengali Śākta Tantra and Modern Western Magic", *Numen*, 50-3 (2003), p. 269-308, here p. 301-303.

²⁵ In his introduction to *The Monk*, Stephen King seems to hold the book in higher regard, portraying it, and Gothic literature more broadly, as a bridge between the "literary" novel and the "popular" novel. See Stephen King, "Introduction", in Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, *op. cit.*, p. XIV-XV. Many others, including myself, might disagree with King on *The Monk*'s literary merit; for an example, see Nina da Vinci Nichols, "Place and Eros in Radcliffe, Lewis, and Brontë", in Juliann E. Fleenor (ed.), *The Female Gothic*, Montréal / London, Eden Press, 1983, p. 187-206.

broadened interest translates to broader archives and better awareness across disciplines; thus, historians might benefit from dipping a toe into the criticism pool.

But esoteric history often fights an uphill battle there. Observe this 1977 review by Russell Fraser, who lambasts Frances Yates's work on Shakespeare:

Recalling that in *Titus Andronicus* the crazy hero and his friends shoot their arrows at the zodiac, she supposes it "perhaps a very significant detail that it was Lucius who hit Virgo in the shooting scene, and therefore, presumably, brought her down to earth. The apotheosis of Lucius at the end of the play thus perhaps represents the Return of the Virgin – the return of the just empire and the golden age". You would not gather from this discussion how cheap and nasty is *Titus Andronicus*, in which considerations of justice and its vindicating are altogether off the point. Shakespeare knows the myths and motifs with which Miss Yates is working. He employs them – in this play – as gimcrackery on a costermonger's coat. [...] Her "new approach" to Shakespeare's Last Plays is abortive in that literature is conceived and treated as a halfway house²⁶.

Firstly, let's look at the explicit complaint here. Yates, by treating an astrological reference in *Titus Andronicus* as a symbol, to perform a sort of allegorical hermeneutic, engages in a half-hearted form of interpretive criticism. Fraser, however, sees this as unsophisticated because Yates's analysis doesn't lead to any insights about the play's preconceived aesthetic quality, which has been traditionally seen as poor. The assumption is that she doesn't care about the play's aesthetic quality, and is therefore a false critic using literature as a mere vessel for history. A proper analysis of the esoteric imagery, according to Fraser, is presumably something that demonstrates how the astrological reference enhances the "gimcrackery" of the work, how it gives the shallow flourishes of unsubstantial style. Of course, Yates is writing before the New Historicism movement of the 1980s, which would change the way many critics approached Shakespeare, and it seems that Fraser is part of an old guard set on defending tradition. While Yates is not without her demerits, her argument and methodology might be slightly better received today.

I would also like to speculate on an implicit complaint that I sense in Fraser's review. A thought experiment: pretend that Yates does exactly as suggested; she analyzes how the astrological reference enhances the literary quality of "gimcrackery", of "cheapness" and "nastiness". Would this be well received by Fraser? I doubt it, because *Titus Andronicus* itself was not well received in Fraser's day precisely because of its sensationalism and its myriad gimcrackeries. Even if the historian of esotericism plays the correct game according to the old guard of literary studies, by irreverently positioning the esoteric as thoroughly unserious, the resulting endeavor wouldn't get far either because it's categorically barred from touching upon what makes literature great, the ultimate goal of the critic. This perspective draws potential parallels to Lewis's situation. To bridge history and criticism in literary occultural contexts, where the work and its esoteric dimensions are both relatively unsophisticated, scholars need a creative approach for extracting a depth that isn't apparent. How can *The Monk's* gimcrackery help us think?

The meaning of the pact

Let's go back to transgressive sex for a moment and see if we can complexify some of the previous observations. Historian Jacques Chiffolleau, in a 2008 article on Gilles de

²⁶ Russell Fraser, "Reviews: Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century...* [and] *Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach...*", *Comparative Drama*, 11-3 (1977), p. 273-278, here p. 275-276.

Rais, argues that demonic allegiance, sexual transgression, and “rebellion” against the state formed a common prosecutorial “triptych” that has existed in European culture since ancient Rome²⁷. If we can apply this triptych to Lewis as a basic hermeneutic, the relations between the demonic contract and the sexual criminality would take on political implications. Now, Lewis is not being accused of the triptych as de Rais was, but as an exercise we will surmise he is rather inverting the process for literary purposes: Lewis appropriates the triptych. We must then ask: where in *The Monk* do we see the third part of this triptych, the rebellion against the state? Some scholars have argued that the novel's engagement with rebellious politics is reflected by its anti-Catholic sentiment²⁸. There's also a mob riot at a convent that occurs in the subplot²⁹, which may be inferred as a commentary on the French Revolution³⁰. Observations about the French Revolution and anti-Catholicism are useful in certain contexts; the book is certainly not pro-Catholic. But I don't know if these observations satisfy the “rebellious” component that we seek. For one, England was already firmly anti-Catholic by Lewis's time, so engaging in the polemic on the Protestant side is not rebellious itself, nor necessarily critical of rebellion. And if the novel's engagement with rebellion is related to a criticism of the French Revolution, or is even just an exploration of the Revolution's ensuing anxieties, the anti-Catholic dimensions and the demonic contracts seem perhaps weakly connected there. The mob riot is only part of the subplot and is not directly related to Ambrosio's own experiences with black magic. Lewis's rebellion, whether it's something he's appropriating or critiquing or both, seems to lie elsewhere.

In search of a more resonant complexity behind Ambrosio's downfall, Freudian analysis potentially ties everything together. In “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis” (1923), Freud analyzes the unique life of a Bavarian painter named Christoph Haizmann. Born in 1651 and dead by 1700, Haizmann began suffering psychiatric symptoms in 1677 after the death of his father, including visions, convulsions, and severe depression. By September of 1677, he had traveled to Mariazell (Austria) in order to seek the guidance of the Benedictines who operated the Shrine of Our Lady of Mariazell. It is reported that, while undergoing an exorcism at the Shrine, Satan appeared in the form of a dragon and returned to Haizmann a document written in blood which was supposedly a contract that had been made nine years ago. Feeling better afterwards, Haizmann moved to Vienna and enjoyed a few months of good health before he became sick again. He

²⁷ “Le lecteur contemporain ne voit peut-être pas assez que les accusations lancées contre le maréchal forment en réalité un triptyque obligé dont l'origine est très ancienne et qui unit très étroitement ; 1. la rébellion, c'est-à-dire le refus intériorisé de l'ordre légitime ; 2. le pacte avec le diable, qui donne des pouvoirs magiques ; 3. les actes contre nature, la sodomie ou l'inceste” ; Jacques Chiffolleau, “Gilles de Rais, ogre ou serial killer ?”, *L'Histoire*, 335 (October 2008), p. 8-16.

²⁸ Steven Blakemore, “Matthew Lewis's Black Mass: Sexual, Religious Inversion in *The Monk*”, *Studies in the Novel*, 30-4 (1998), p. 521-539.

²⁹ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, *op. cit.*, p. 355-358.

³⁰ “Writing at a specific historical moment when the French Revolution seemed to be inverting the ‘natural’ order of things, Matthew Lewis, in the end, restores the natural order: Raymond and Lorenzo regain their manhood and marry, and the novel's deviant ‘women’ are punished. Agnes, Marguerite, and the Bleeding Nun, for instance, violate their vows or virtue and are imprisoned, raped, or killed. Donna Rodolpho, the adulteress manque whose husband pays to her ‘absolute submission’, appropriately dies of a burst ‘blood-vessel’. Even the passively innocent Antonia (instinctively drawn to her brother) is imprisoned and raped, and Ambrosio is punishingly metamorphosed into Matilda's ‘woman’ and Lucifer's ‘bride’. More importantly, the novel is a culmination of a Protestant tradition of demonizing Catholicism as the mutant, alien Other. In this reading, Catholicism feminizes its masculine celebrants (and celibates) as well as the submissive, superstitious populace it overpowers and awes, even though the populace finally revolts and overthrows the Church's ‘structure’”; Steven Blakemore, “Matthew Lewis's Black Mass”, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

returned to Mariazell in 1678 with tales of another devil's pact, a second, different contract. But this one was written in ink, not blood, and it was *prior* to the blood pact. During this second tenure at the Shrine, he also produced a series of paintings depicting Satan with an androgynous body, complete with large feminine breasts. Another exorcism is presumed to have occurred, although the details of it are not included in the official documents related to the case, except that "he prayed". Whatever happened, it all culminated in the retrieval of this second pact, after which Haizmann was cured and joined the Order of the Brothers Hospitaller.

What makes this case particularly interesting to Freud is the nature of Haizmann's contracts. The painter does not ask for worldly rewards, like sex, power, wealth, or talent. In fact, the Devil appeared to Haizmann several times, offering him magical powers and money, but Haizmann turned down these boons. Haizmann alludes to the vague origins of the agreements in the captions for some of his satanic paintings. He claims to have primarily desired to "banish" his "melancholy"; this was what he asked of the Devil. But the terms as they supposedly appeared in the contracts are not phrased in such a way. Freud breaks down the conundrum eloquently:

These bonds bring us two great surprises. In the first place, they mention no *undertaking* given by the Devil in return for whose fulfilment the painter pledges his eternal bliss, but only a *demand* made by the Devil which the painter must satisfy. It strikes us as quite illogical and absurd that this man should give up his soul, not for something he is to *get* from the Devil but for something he is to *do* for him. But the undertaking given by the *painter* seems even stranger.

The first "syngrapha" [bond], written in ink, runs as follows: "Ich Christoph Haizmann vndterschreibe mich disen Herrn sein leibeigener Sohn auff 9. Jahr. 1669 Jahr³¹." The second, written in blood, runs:

"Anno 1669.

Christoph Haizmann. Ich verschreibe mich disen Satan ich sein leibeigner Sohn zu sein, und in 9. Jahr ihm mein Leib und Seel zuzugeheren³²."

All our astonishment vanishes, however, if we read the text of the bonds in the sense that what is represented in them as a demand made by the Devil is, on the contrary, a service performed by him – that is to say, it is a demand made by the *painter*. The incomprehensible pact would in that case have a straightforward meaning and could be paraphrased thus. The Devil undertakes to replace the painter's lost father for nine years. [...] A man who has fallen into a melancholia on account of his father's death must really have been fond of him. But, if so, it is very strange that such a man should have hit upon the idea of taking the Devil as a substitute for the father whom he loved³³.

Freud hits the obvious question: Why would a God-fearing, early-modern man like Haizmann *want* to be the son of Satan? While it's easy to see how the death of his father led to a need for a paternal figure, that doesn't explain why the Devil should seem a suitable candidate, nor why he was appearing to Haizmann with female sex characteristics. Essentially reducing the problem to libidinal frustration, Freud writes:

The contradictions in the original nature of God are, however, a reflection of the ambivalence which governs the relation of the individual to his personal father. If the benevolent and righteous God is a substitute for his father, it is not to be wondered at that his hostile attitude to his father, too, which is one of hating and fearing him and of making complaints against him, should have

³¹ "[I, Christoph Haizmann, subscribe myself to this Lord as his bounden son till the ninth year. Year 1669.]" Sigmund Freud, "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis", in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, London, The Hogarth Press/The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986, p. 69-105, here p. 81, n. 4.

³² "[Christoph Haizmann. I sign a bond with this Satan, to be his bounden son and in the ninth year to belong to him body and soul.]" *Ibid.*, p. 82, n. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 81-82.

come to expression in the creation of Satan. Thus the father, it seems, is the individual prototype of both God and the Devil. [...] It is no unusual thing for a man to acquire a melancholic depression and an inhibition in his work as a result of his father's death. When this happens, we conclude that the man had been attached to his father with an especially strong love, and we remember how often a severe melancholia appears as a neurotic form of mourning.

In this we are undoubtedly right. But we are not right if we conclude further that this relation has been merely one of love. On the contrary, his mourning over the loss of his father is the more likely to turn into melancholia, the more his attitude to him bore the stamp of ambivalence. This emphasis on ambivalence, however, prepares us for the possibility of the father being subjected to a debasement, as we see happening in the painter's demonological neurosis³⁴.

In other words, we might basically say that Satan becomes a father-figure because of the son's need to both acknowledge *and* compromise the father's power. And this same logic also informs the androgyny of Haizmann's paintings:

On the first occasion, as I have mentioned, he saw the Evil One in the shape of an honest citizen. But already on the second occasion the Devil was naked and misshapen, and had two pairs of female breasts. In none of his subsequent apparitions are the breasts absent, either as a single or a double pair. Only in one of them does the Devil exhibit, in addition to the breasts, a large penis ending in a snake. This stressing of the female sexual character by introducing large pendulous breasts (there is never any indication of the female genitals) is bound to appear to us as a striking contradiction of our hypothesis that the Devil had the meaning of a father-substitute for the painter. And, indeed, such a way of representing the Devil is in itself unusual. Where 'devil' is thought of in a generic sense, and devils appear in numbers, there is nothing strange about depicting female devils; but that the Devil, who is a great individuality, the Lord of Hell and the Adversary of God, should be represented otherwise than as a male, and, indeed, as a super-male, with horns, tail and a big penis-snake – this, I believe, is never found.

These two slight indications give us an idea of what the typical factor is which determines the negative side of the painter's relation to his father. What he is rebelling against is his feminine attitude to him which culminates in a phantasy of bearing him a child (the nine years). We have an accurate knowledge of this resistance from our analyses, where it takes on very strange forms in the transference and gives us a great deal of trouble. With the painter's mourning for his lost father, and the heightening of his longing for him, there also comes about in him a re-activation of his long-since repressed phantasy of pregnancy, and he is obliged to defend himself against it by a neurosis and by debasing his father.

But why should his father, after being reduced to the status of a Devil, bear this physical mark of a woman? The feature seems at first hard to interpret; but soon we find two explanations which compete with each other without being mutually exclusive. A boy's feminine attitude to his father undergoes repression as soon as he understands that his rivalry with a woman for his father's love has as a precondition the loss of his own male genitals, in other words, castration. Repudiation of the feminine attitude is thus the result of a revolt against castration. It regularly finds its strongest expression in the converse phantasy of castrating the father, of turning him into a woman. Thus the Devil's breasts would correspond to a projection of the subject's own femininity on to the father-substitute. The second explanation of these female additions to the Devil's body no longer has a hostile meaning but an affectionate one. It sees in the adoption of this shape an indication that the child's tender feelings towards his mother have been displaced on to his father; and this suggests that there has previously been a strong fixation on the mother³⁵.

So, Satan becomes Haizmann's androgynous father to heal the rupture of feminizing paternal forces. The father's position as Satan retains authority while nevertheless being subjugated to the Law. Satan's feminine traits perform the same function of debasement to resolve the psychic conflict between the fear of castration and the desire for castration. The presence of a strong father is a castrating force that we suffer yet still admire, while the loss of that father becomes a lack that we then eroticize, and thus the lost father returns in debased form as a fearsome libidinal object.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89-90.

Now, certainly, Freudian analyses of *The Monk* are nothing new. Early examples of this current seem to arise in the 1970s, with English doctoral dissertations like “The Metaphysical Implications of Incest in Romantic Literature³⁶”. But I am not sure if anyone has yet compared the novel to Freud’s reading of the Haizmann case. Others have come close: there have been Haizmannian readings of Jules Verne’s “initiatric” literature³⁷, and Haizmannian readings of Faustian literature³⁸, but no Haizmannian readings of Lewis that are easily findable. This is a curious oversight to me because I am struck by how thoroughly (and obviously) both Lewis’s own biography and the facts of the text itself seem to mirror Freud’s theory.

The experience of the author

First, the biography. In 1781, when Lewis was six years old, his parents separated and his mother went to live in hiding with her new boyfriend, beginning a lengthy and acrimonious divorce process involving years of strife that greatly affected Lewis³⁹. This resulted in a close but complicated connection with his mother where he often saw himself as her protector and moral counsel. By the early 1800s, the strained situation led to Lewis’s deep hatred of his father’s mistress, Sophia Ricketts, and he ended up taking his mother’s side in certain disputes. His father in turn saw Lewis’s actions as disloyal and responded with a variety of domestic and financial consequences. Within this brief story of Lewis’s family, we can see all the same dynamics that Freud discusses, however general they might be. In this case, the dissolution of the marriage and the resulting conflicts reflect the loss of the father figure and the maternal attachment complex. The domestic and financial penalties he incurred reflect the father as a castrating or feminizing force. And the poor relationship Lewis had with his father’s girlfriend mirrors the competition for the father’s love. While the controversies attendant to Sophia Rickett’s involvement began well after the publication of *The Monk*, it would nevertheless appear that Lewis’s response to the situation was a product of previous energies stemming from the difficult marriage. Lewis’s own possible homosexuality adds a further wrinkle to the potential for eroticizing his father’s image. Essentially, we see all the theorized components of Freud’s demonological neurosis present in Lewis’s young life. It’s a textbook case. And while MacDonald’s excellent biography of Lewis engages quite a bit in biographical readings of his literary efforts, including speculations on literary renditions of father figures, there is no direct connection made to *The Monk*’s Lucifer as a sort of father.

Parallels to Haizmann’s psychic injuries, per Freud, are also prominent in the novel itself. For example, recall that Ambrosio is an orphan; he is fatherless, does not know who his parents are. At the end, Lucifer reveals that Elvira was his mother, but the identity

³⁶ William Henry Hagen Jr., *The Metaphysical Implications of Incest in Romantic Literature*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina (April 1974). For an official publication pairing Freud and Lewis (more recent as well), see Lisa Naomi Mulman, “Sexuality on the Surface: Catholicism and the Erotic Object in Lewis’s *The Monk*”, *The Bucknell Review*, 42-1 (1998), p. 98-110. For a homosexual reading of *The Monk*, see also Daniel L. MacDonald, *Monk Lewis*, *op. cit.*, p. 77-80.

³⁷ Athanasia Theodoropoulou, *Stories of Initiation for the Modern Age: Explorations of Textual and Theatrical Fantasy in Jules Verne’s Voyage à Travers l’Impossible and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh (August 2008), p. 108-114.

³⁸ Pedro Heliodoro Tavares, “Repercussões da temática de Fausto na gênese das formulações teórico-clínicas de Freud e Lacan”, in Nabil Araújo (ed.), *Re-figurações de Fausto: Entre Literatura e Mito*, Rio de Janeiro, Makunaima, 2020, p. 246-268.

³⁹ Daniel L. MacDonald, *Monk Lewis*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-13.

of his father *remains* unknown. Also recall that there are two versions of Lucifer in the story. The later incarnation, the one who makes Ambrosio sign the blood pact and then kills him, is hideous and terrifying; his head is full of phallic snakes; when he takes Ambrosio's soul, we might read the soul as the phallus, and the document written in blood being the castration apparatus. This castrating version of Lucifer no doubt represents the father in his most masculine aspect, the one who disinherits. But the earlier version is a rather inverted form. The first incarnation of Lucifer is described as young and handsome, even the most beautiful creature the monk has ever seen. Lucifer's youthful form is also submissive; he consents to empower Ambrosio without asking for anything in return; the myrtle branch talisman no doubt has a phallic connotation to it, and the demon's relinquishing of the branch is a consent to castration, cultivating the father's feminine aspect as another form of debasement.

See how the rebellion that Lewis depicts not only through the monk's transgressive sexuality but through his demonic allegiances goes well beyond the topical allusions to the French Revolution or anti-Catholic discourses. These transgressions against the father here make more sense as *primarily* explorations of psychological repression, with their demonological motifs functioning as a therapeutic playground. Ambrosio's sexual crimes transgress the law of the highest father, God, who gave him the castration of being orphaned, setting up his celibate adult life. The monk reclaims the phallus by his transgressions with Matilda, then by his disposal of Matilda and his desire for Antonia, and so the father returns in debased form as the homoerotic, feminine, young Lucifer, himself castrated in order to further empower Ambrosio's rebellion. Of course, the rapacious rebellion has unwanted consequences (incest, murder, prosecution), reflecting the guilt that comes from debasing and castrating the father. When the father returns to bring the justice of the law (the written contract), he has himself already reclaimed the phallus to an absurd degree, his own head crowned with a collection of serpentine phalluses, and the blood signature of Ambrosio's final castration returns patriarchal power to its seat so that the son can be reconciled through the redemption of suffering.

The Monk's susceptibility to psychoanalysis lets us see how rituals in literature can express profound mental processes, even in cases like Lewis where the esoteric motifs are used in an ostensibly unserious way. This should invite us toward Freudian readings of esoteric ritual more generally. Yet, while scholars like Hugh Urban and Miriam Wallraven have noted that Freud influenced a variety of occultists like Aleister Crowley⁴⁰ and Dion Fortune⁴¹, and psychoanalysis has been nearly done to death in literary studies, it's still not a very popular mode from the historicist lens of literary esotericism studies. For example, in Per Faxneld's *Satanic Feminism* (2017), which posits Lewis's *The Monk* part of the satanic feminist tradition⁴², Faxneld observes that certain texts in this genre are ripe for Freudian analysis, but he doesn't engage in it much. Additionally, Faxneld even seems to disparage the interpretation at times⁴³.

⁴⁰ See Hugh B. Urban, "The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley and Sex Magick in Late Victorian England", in *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press, 2006, p. 109-139.

⁴¹ See Miriam Wallraven, "'She became a priestess': Occult Liminality, Psychoanalysis, and the Role of the Text in Dion Fortune's *The Sea Priestess* (1938)", in *Women Writers and the Occult in Literature and Culture: Female Lucifers, Priestesses, and Witches*, New York / London, Routledge, 2015, p. 83-105.

⁴² Per Faxneld, "Satan as the Emancipator of Woman in Gothic Literature", in *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 143-196.

⁴³ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, *op. cit.*, p. 467, n. 17.

I might argue that historians of esotericism seldom go far enough in the psychoanalytical vein. And certainly, historians of literary esotericism have cause to take this direction if they want to engage in meaningful criticism. Touching upon what T.S. Eliot might describe as a conflict between “inner-voice” criticism and “traditional” criticism⁴⁴, *The Monk* via Freud could help us think through some of Eliot’s concerns. In an essay titled “The Function of Criticism” (1923), Eliot makes a thoughtful and well-reasoned attack on inner-voice criticism (the belief that literary value can derive from an author’s connection with their innermost emotional and spiritual states). For Eliot, literary traditions were the only way to assess and develop technical achievement, the only way in which critics could meaningfully talk about the text in and of itself, and therefore discussions of technical achievement were the only objective way for critics to assess the value of literary works. The inner voice, for Eliot, thus becomes arbitrary, and tradition becomes the only form of critical truth. But this leads us to a curious problem with *The Monk*. Lewis’s “Gothic” novel was very popular, but its popularity and the good reception among those who defended it were *not* much derived from its engagement with the Gothic tradition. Indeed, despite the fact that Lewis was an admirer of Anne Radcliffe, there are some things about *The Monk* that do not seem so Gothic, at least per Lewis’s position in the genre’s timeline. According to Hagen:

The impact of the Gothic form was intended to overwhelm the reader with mystery and then, in the true Enlightenment tradition, resolve all tension with a logical, detective-story type ending. Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* is a classic in this procedure. Mysterious voices, which drive the religious fanatic Wieland to destroy his family, are only the result of the ventriloquist Carwin. Clara, Wieland’s sister, relates the novel in epistolary form to build suspense until everything is rationally explained in the novel’s conclusion⁴⁵.

The Monk does not really attempt this “detective” dimension of the genre; at least, not exactly as Hagen has described it. The supernatural events therein are genuine within the story’s world. On a personal note, I would also posit that Lewis’s writing style has not aged well; it is eloquent at times, but on the whole, the style is often tedious and overwrought and immature. We could perhaps temper these observations by reading it as a melodrama, but that’s not usually how the book is marketed. How then, if not from “tradition,” and not really from “technical achievement,” can we account for the novel’s success?

Maybe explaining popularity is not part of the critic’s job. And maybe we need to call out undeserved reception when we see it. Hagen notes that, “The novels and plays in this [Gothic] tradition become a vehicle for the elevation of Enlightenment reason over the emotional corruption of the Church and incest merely serves to sweeten the pie⁴⁶”. It would be easy to merely chalk up the novel’s success to this sort of “sweetened pie” argument: popular readers love the sensationalism of incestual and esoteric motifs, and Lewis deploys these with just enough competence and sauciness to titillate his fans. But I suspect that, even if such an observation were generally true, when the critic stops there (or even when the critic outright refuses to account for popularity), we get a lazy form of criticism.

A more intelligent position is to attempt to meet the text at its most sophisticated level. More background on the novel’s reception may help snap things into focus:

⁴⁴ T.S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism”, in *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1934, p. 23-34.

⁴⁵ William Henry Hagen Jr., *The Metaphysical Implications of Incest in Romantic Literature*, op. cit., p. 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

In the *Analytical Review* for October 1796, Mary Wollstonecraft was especially impressed by Matilda's seduction of Ambrosio: "the whole temptation is so artfully contrived, that a man, it should seem, were he made as other men are, would deserve to be d–ned who could resist even devilish spells, conducted with such address, and assuming such a heavenly form." She had begun her affair with Godwin in August. Her only reservation was that "the language and manners of the personages are not sufficiently gothic in their colouring, to agree with the superstitious scenery, borrowed from those times⁴⁷".

Here we see the potential for a similar argument regarding Lewis's place in tradition: Wollstonecraft, despite liking the book, thinks *The Monk* somewhat fails in terms of being part of the Gothic genre. But she is interested in how Lewis portrays Matilda's "seduction" of Ambrosio; this perhaps hints at the feminist impact of the book that Farnfield observes. Wollstonecraft says the temptation is "artfully conceived", but it's hard to know exactly what she means because I don't see the seduction as "artfully" *executed*. We might say that rather than tradition or technique being her metrics, she's admiring the creativity of Lewis's scenarios, and I suspect she appreciates the feminist thinking that those scenarios make room for. Despite his shortcomings, Lewis maybe taps into something that Wollstonecraft finds "internally" resonant.

It's possible to apply this lens to the occult dimensions of the novel. Rather than simply assuming that the esoteric imagery, including the Devil's pact, is all pure sensationalism to thrill the baser multitude, and that because it's superficial it fails at the level of esoteric tradition, we can instead take a more inner-voice approach, through Freud, to develop a sense of how those occult motifs might do something meaningful for a sophisticated audience. A thought experiment: I do not know if Crowley ever read *The Monk* (it wouldn't surprise me if he had); I imagine that if he did, he would've liked it. But he wouldn't have liked it as an intelligent take on esoteric currents, because it's not. Crowley would've enjoyed the book precisely because of the Freudian work that its ritual scenes make room for. It's this psychological subtext of *The Monk* that allows for a deeper appreciation, not just from a literary point of view but from the view of esotericism studies as well⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Daniel L. MacDonald, *Monk Lewis, op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁴⁸ For a recent example of ritual psychoanalysis, see Richard Kaczynski, *Mind over Magick: The Psychology of Ritual Magick*, Rochester, Park Street Press, 2025.